

In his first address to Congress, President Barack Obama pledged to help the U.S. achieve the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. Others such as the Lumina and Gates foundations have made similar calls. Are the goals realistic? How can they be reached? More support for less-expensive community colleges? More focus on *completion* rates, rather than enrollment? Improved productivity? Then there's that 800-pound gorilla in the room: persistent inequity in who gets in to college and who graduates. *NEJHE* asked the U.S. secretary of education and others to offer a prognosis on the degree-attainment goal.

Historic Opportunity for Action

In a single generation, we have fallen from second to 11th place in the percentage of students completing college

ARNE DUNCAN

When President Obama took office, he pledged to revitalize an economy in the midst of the deepest recession in a generation. Working with Congress, he acted quickly to enact an \$878 billion package to stimulate the economy in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). More than \$100 billion of that will be for education, spanning from early childhood programs to college aid.

The ARRA's primary goal is to help the economy emerge from the current recession. But the president is pursuing other policies, both in the short and long term, to ensure economic growth. At the heart of these policies is the goal of making college affordable and accessible to millions of students who otherwise might not be able to go.

In the FY 2010 budget, the Obama administration will propose a historic increase in student aid of \$32 billion over fiscal 2008. The budget also will save \$21 billion over the next five years by cutting bank subsidies and making loans directly from the U.S. Department of Education. These changes also will make student loans easier to obtain and easier to pay back.

Of all of the changes, the shift in the Pell Grant program is the most significant. The ARRA increased the maximum size of the Pell Grant for low-income families from \$4,850 to \$5,350. The FY 2010 budget will increase it again to \$5,500. Every year thereafter, the size of the grant will increase by the Consumer Price Index, plus 1%. The changes will ensure that an additional 1.5 million students receive Pell Grants.

More importantly, the Pell Grant will become an entitlement, meaning low-income students can be assured that the award will be there for them when they go to college, whether that's in six months or six years. Low-income families need to know that this program is a federal priority over the long term.

The president also is committed to making federal student loans affordable and accessible. By changing the federal student loan program, the budget will eliminate the costs of subsidizing banks and paying other intermediaries in the student loan process. The changes will save almost \$4 billion a year for taxpayers while streamlining the process of making loans.

President Obama is relying on his higher education budget to be the engine that will drive the nation's economic recovery. Our nation's economy won't continue to grow without an educated workforce. The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that 90% of the nation's fastest growing jobs of the future will require some postsecondary education or training. Today, only one-third of Americans have a college degree. In a single generation, we have fallen from second to 11th place in the percentage of students completing college. In a speech to Congress on Feb. 24, the president challenged the country to lead the world in college completion by 2020.

But financial assistance alone will not ensure success. Students have to be prepared to meet rigorous academic programs in college. At the K-12 level, the Obama administration is promoting reforms that ensure they will succeed in college.

Under the ARRA, states will be working on four core areas of reform:

- Implementing college- and career-ready standards and assessments;
- Creating comprehensive data systems that track students throughout their education career and measure which teachers are having the best impact on student performance;
- Recruiting, preparing and rewarding outstanding teachers—paying more to teachers who work in tough schools and those who have a positive impact on their students' achievement; and
- Turning around chronically underperforming schools by encouraging states and districts to take whatever actions are needed to fix them, even shutting down some schools and re-opening them with new leadership and staff.

By making these and other changes to increase funding for higher education and driving reform throughout the education system, we will ensure that more students have access to a college education and the support they need to succeed.

Increased demand, unprecedented funding and heightened expectations have placed the nation's system of higher education at the forefront of change for a better America. This is a historic opportunity to answer the president's call to action.

Arne Duncan is U.S. secretary of education. Email: arne.duncan@ed.gov